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A really bad deal: the Iran nuclear deal and its implications

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Published online: 30 November 2015

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Abstract With the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action Iran has been handed an important diplomatic victory. As a result, Iran can keep its nuclear infrastructure, something which the negotiators for the P5+1—the five permanent members of the UN Security Council (the US, the UK, France, Russia and China) plus Germany—said from the outset should be dismantled. It has also let Iran off the hook of having to come clean about its constant cheating over the years concerning its nuclear agenda. And in the short run, a far more important outcome of the deal is that Iran will be able to free up billions of dollars to continue its regional agenda of influencing and destabilising countries in the Middle East.

Keywords Iran | Nuclear deal | Regional hegemony | Instability | US

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We must combat the plans of the arrogance [code-word for the West led by the US] with Jihad for the sake of Allah. . . . The clearest essence of jihad for the sake of God today is to identify the plots of arrogance in the Islamic region. . . . The planning for the struggle against them should include both defense and offense.

Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei at a religious conference on 7 August, just over a month after the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (MacEoin 2015)

They [the US and the Zionists] should know that the Islamic Revolution will continue enhancing its preparedness until it overthrows Israel and liberates Palestine.

Brigadier General Mohsen Kazemayni, Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps top commander in Tehran province, on 2 September (MacEoin 2015).

Introduction

In late July EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini went to Tehran. The visit was meant to show that the Islamic Republic was now on its way to mending fences with the EU and that a new, more peaceful chapter was to begin between Iran and its adversaries after the nuclear deal. The pictures from Mogherini's meeting with the Iranian Foreign Secretary show a beaming Zarif and a veiled Mogherini. It is a picture that makes it abundantly clear that the nuclear deal, now also signed by the US Congress, is an all-out win for the Iranian regime. Iran has got everything that it wanted, and then some. The image also depicts the complete capitulation of the EU. By pandering to the very conservative interpretation of Islam that the Iranian regime follows, Mogherini, knowingly or not, sent out a message—easily understood in the region—that the EU had succumbed to Iran without question. No wonder Zarif is beaming happily.

Rewarding the culprit: strengthening Iran's regional role

This message that the EU was prepared to prostrate itself before the Iranians was, embarrassingly enough, reiterated by Mogherini some time later at the Munich Security Conference, when she said that the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) could help solve the Syrian crisis. If this view is common among the members of the EU, it reveals an astonishing lack of understanding of what perpetuates the Syrian war (it is not a mere crisis), now in its fifth year. Without Iranian help, the regime of President Assad would hardly still be holding out in Damascus and, with the help of Russia, Iran has managed to extend its influence in the region and is now poised to influence politics there even more, thanks to the JCPOA. Apart from sending direct economic aid to Assad, the Iranians have helped to set up the so-called National Defence Forces, which are locally based militias that operate outside the constraints of the regular army and are every bit as brutal as the Islamist groups.

Mogherini's message from Munich was swiftly taken up by Iran and Russia, who presented a peace plan in September (with a role for Assad) that gave Iran a firm grip on regional developments. To really show how little Russia cares for the US (and even less for the EU), in September President Putin loudly and proudly announced the sending of troops and military hardware (such as tanks, unmanned aerial vehicles and aircraft) to Assad, completely ignoring US protestations. With confirmation of the deal, the assumption in the regional Middle Eastern and North African capitals—from Morocco to Saudi Arabia—is that the US is on its way out and the Europeans are throwing in the towel as they simultaneously try to end the war in Syria and handle the hundreds of thousands of people pouring into Europe. The result being that in the immediate future, Iran will play an even larger role in the region.

This is even more surprising as, in the process leading up to the negotiations between the P5+1 and Iran, it had taken several years of sanctions to force Iran to the negotiating table in the first place. Prior to the negotiations, its allies, Hezbollah, the various Shi'ite militias and Assad, had all been suffering set-backs and the Iranian economy was in dire straits. A very common view (emphatically shared with the author in several conversations with policymakers and researchers in the region over the last two years) was that a firmer and more consistent policy with regard to the sanctions regime would have weakened Iran and forced the various Islamist actors to at least scale down their ambitions and give diplomacy, backed up with some serious military might, a new chance in Syria. Former US President Theodore Roosevelt's adage that successful diplomacy is possible if 'you talk softly and carry a very large stick' had a lot going for it in a region shaken by the upheavals of the Arab Spring.

Instead the opposite happened, as demonstrated by the resulting nuclear deal. Iran has been 'rescued' by the P5+1 negotiators and given a new lease of life, freeing up assets and resources that it is quite obviously intent on using, at least in part, to escalate its already destabilising role. This will mainly be done through regional allies and proxies such as Hezbollah, the Assad regime, and a number of Shi'ite militias in both Syria and Iraq. Most analysts agree that Iran's direct military presence in Syria is fairly modest. However, Iran plays a fundamental role because it is using the elite Quds Force (of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, IRGC) and hundreds of personnel to help the forces of the Syrian government with key aspects of the war.

The goals of the Iranian regime are also clear. In the words of Iranian Professor Hossein Mousavian (Petraeus and Jeffrey 2015), these goals are, first, to drive the Americans out of the region (a goal, if one asks traditional US allies in the region, that Iran is well on its way to achieving); second, to weaken Israel; and third, to establish Iranian hegemony in the Gulf area and beyond. With the war in Syria, the civil war in Iraq, and upheavals and political pandemonium from Libya to Yemen, Iran has played a skilful game and managed to outmanoeuvre both Washington and Brussels, weaken its adversaries in the Gulf Cooperation Council, and put US and Western allies on the back foot. In effect, Iran controls or at least influences policies in the capitals of Baghdad, Damascus and Beirut, having already created an arc of influence stretching from Iran itself all the way to the Mediterranean.

A flawed arms-control measure

The JCPOA is, on the face of it, a tool to stop Iran from developing nuclear weapons. That it might do, for a time at least. But even the US administration has admitted that there are loopholes that need to be vigilantly guarded. Moreover, it does not stop Iran from enriching uranium as initially suggested. The still secret protocols about how Iran is to conduct inspections with the International Atomic Energy Agency and to what extent the snap-back sanctions could and may be invoked have also not been resolved at the time of writing, and we may never know what they are for sure. The military complex at Parchin is a case in point, as the International Atomic Energy Agency (which oversees nuclear developments worldwide) has agreed that only Iranians will need to inspect it. Apart from uranium enrichment (which the deal permits Iran to continue), the goal stated by the P5+1 to make Iran come clean on its earlier cheating and breach of a number of UN Security Council Resolutions concerning the nuclear issue was also given up. And the fact that Iran, after an initial period, will be free to develop and trade in ballistic missiles renders the guarantees intended to keep Iran in line rather remote and shallow. Iran's ambition to be, as former US ambassador to Turkey and Iraq James Jeffrey (Petraeus and Jeffrey 2015) has observed, 'a regional hegemon', is still very much one of Tehran's goals and, with the agreement of the JCPOA, this has become a lot easier. With the JCPOA virtually a done deal, the Iranian regime has managed to put the US and the EU in a corner, from which both Washington and Brussels will have to defend the agreement. And by being difficult and refusing to sign until a number of major concessions had been fulfilled, Iran was, more or less, holding the US and the EU hostage, knowing that both were reluctant to challenge Tehran out of fear that this could undermine the deal. Thus, Iran is free to pursue its policies in the region, having removed a major impediment (the economic sanctions) through the JCPOA.

If this Iranian expansion of influence is to be countered, there is really no substitute for the US providing the countervailing force. There is no questioning the US's capability, but there are serious questions about its political will and intentions, which was clearly visible in May when Washington invited the Gulf countries for a summit meeting. The idea was to reassure the US's allies that Washington would not let them down. However, not only did four of the six Gulf Cooperation Council heads of state stay away from the meeting, but the summit came to be more about military hardware than about reassurances that the US would not let Iran gain more power via the nuclear deal. These reassurances never materialised and, as the deal shows, Iran got away with the prize, with the P5+1 acquiescing on most Iranian demands.

Mogherini's statement about the JCPOA deal as a possible part of the solution to the Syria crisis, was echoed by US officials, who said that the deal could pave the way for better US–Iranian relations. But, as the quotes above show, along with subsequent statements from Khamenei (and others), these declarations are based more on wishful thinking than on hard evidence that Iran has changed its intransigent position towards the US (or the West for that matter). For example, on Ali Khamenei's website in early September statements were posted to the effect that the nuclear deal was a 'specific' deal and would not set the stage for 'talks in other areas' (Murphy 2015).

Other comments included, ‘The Iranian nation ousted the Satan’ and ‘We should not let it back through the window to penetrate’ (Murphy 2015). These are hardly evidence of a change of heart in Tehran and raise a number of questions as to how serious the Iranian regime really is about the touted *détente* as a consequence of the JCPOA.

JCPOA: defending against a straw man?

In assessing whether the JCPOA really is an adequate safeguard against the Iranian pursuit of nuclear weapons, two major scenarios are usually discussed; either an overt ‘break-out’, whereby Iran throws out inspectors and openly begins to enrich uranium to weapons grade using the plants at Natanz and Fordow; or a covert break-out (a ‘sneak-out’), whereby Iran starts to build parallel nuclear infrastructures in secret to produce fissile material for a bomb. Both of these scenarios are, ostensibly, blocked by the JCPOA. But both scenarios also rest on the assumption that Iran would sacrifice its reconciliation and economic benefits for the dubious gratification of building a bomb. This is, however, very unlikely. If the regime in Tehran really wanted to build a bomb, or at least gain the capacity to build one, they would more likely go along with their obligations under the JCPOA to the degree necessary to avoid any costly consequences. Since the involvement of the UN Security Council is required to re-impose sanctions under the JCPOA, anything less than a really big breach (a capital crime, so to speak) would go unpunished. Small-scale cheating is, in essence, virtually unpunishable. But such small-scale cheating could easily lead to Iran gaining the capacity to build a bomb without having triggered any snap-back sanctions. This scenario is sometimes described as a ‘creep-out’, especially since Iran will be able to continue to produce weapons-grade uranium. As an arms-control agreement, the JCPOA is very flawed.

Fear of the Sunnis: a neighbourhood bully on the loose

In terms of the region, and especially the Arab-speaking world, concerns have focused less on the arms-control and nuclear elements of the deal—the very parts that constituted the major focus for the P5+1—than on the fact that Iran, through the deal, will be able to keep pushing its regional hegemonic ambitions. Among Iran’s Sunni adversaries, this is the real negative fall-out from the JCPOA. And it is also what the Iranian regime has been aiming for all along. It has never been Iran’s intention to quickly build a bomb. The emphasis has always been on struggling out of the crippling economic sanctions and gaining political and economic advantages in the region. And by playing along with US and EU rhetoric about nuclear issues and pushing other, non-nuclear-related issues to the top of the agenda, Iran could easily outmanoeuvre the US and the EU, which have fallen for the ruse. Iran has got what it wanted all along—sanctions relief and political status in the region—by relenting on some nuclear issues which they never really intended to stick up for anyway. The big prize has always been the leeway to pursue its regional agenda, and Tehran has achieved this. What’s surprising is that it has managed to achieve all of this at such a small cost. With regard to the nuclear deal, as

stated above, Iran will be able to keep virtually all of its nuclear infrastructure (with the exception of the Arak core) and will still be able to produce enriched uranium.

But the really big Iranian victory lies in the fact that, as part of the deal, Iran got the P5+1 to agree to remove the IRGC and its Quds commander Major-General Qasem Soleimani from the list of those subject to sanctions by the West. Since very few individuals can compete with Soleimani when it comes to pursuing terrorism in the region (and, for that matter, in South America and Europe as well), this is an astonishing self-imposed defeat by the P5+1. The amount of money being freed up by the JCPOA deal is estimated to be at least US\$60 billion (Gerson 2015). This ties in nicely with Iranian ambitions in the region. There are at least five conflicts in the region in which Iran is heavily engaged and which will immediately be affected by an influx of money:

- In Lebanon, Iranian proxy Hezbollah is the leading political and military actor. Hezbollah depends totally on Iranian largesse to maintain its position. Courtesy of the US and the EU (who have both designated Hezbollah's military wing a terrorist entity), that position can be sustained.
- In Syria, Iranian support (to the tune of approximately US\$1 billion a month) for President Assad is essential to keeping him in Damascus and, as long as Assad remains, the war remains. With the creation of the brutal National Defence Forces (mentioned above) Iran ensures that vicious entities such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State will continue to flourish.
- In Iraq, Shi'ite militias, organised in the *Hashd al-Shaabi*, play a key role in proping up the Abadi administration. These militias are trained and financed by Iran through Soleimani of the IRGC and his right-hand man in Iraq, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis (also thought to be a member of the IRGC).
- In Yemen, the Iranians are providing the Houthi rebels with arms and money, keeping the bloody insurgency going.
- Finally, among the Palestinians, Iran runs and operates the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, an organisation at odds with the Palestinian Authority, as well as intent on fighting Israel until it is destroyed, a goal cherished by the regime in Tehran of course. At the same time, Iran is doing its utmost to rebuild relations with Hamas and its *Izzadin Kassam* military wing.

Conclusion

All these efforts cost money, and until the negotiations got under way several of them had been stymied or at least severely limited. Now though, thanks to the lifting of sanctions, money is being freed up and Iranian influence strengthened and enhanced throughout the region. Unless one is cynical enough to believe that that was the P5+1's intention all the time, it must be chalked up as one of the most spectacular unintended consequences ever. That it is entirely self-inflicted adds to the surreal picture of how a deal touted as a way to stop Iran from building a nuclear bomb and that would push back against its regional destructive ambitions has managed to achieve the exact opposite. The bomb may take another decade, if Iran really wants it. But as stated above, that is

rather unlikely and Iran will probably happily settle for being given the tools to assemble the know-how instead, waiting for a more opportune moment to go all out for a bomb.

In the meantime, the regime in Tehran can readjust to the much more important achievement of having secured its position in the region, been freed from tough economic sanctions and been re-invited into the diplomatic salons, while being able to continue to extend its influence and power into the Middle East. As journalist Jonathan Speyer (2015) wrote in an op-ed on 18 July in the *Jerusalem Post*, ‘The nuclear deal compounds and completes the picture. From the perspective of the Saudis and other Sunni Arabs, Iranian ruthlessness, clarity and advance combined with the flailing, retreating US regional policy now so much in evidence spell potential disaster’.

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